

Sermon for May 25, 2014 - Easter 6

Acts 17:22-31 (NKJV)

Theme: The truth about. . .

- 1) *God*
- 2) *Man*
- 3) *Salvation*

²² Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³ for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: ²⁴ God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵ Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. ²⁶ And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷ so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’ ²⁹ Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. ³⁰ Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹ because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

Introduction

Imagine living in a society that prides itself in having many gods, but knows nothing about Christianity or the Bible; a society that has become so immoral that it seems to have no concept of what “sin” is (celebrating perversions like homosexuality, abortion and even pedophilia). How do you share the Gospel in such a society? Where do you even begin?

The society I described to you is not imaginary; it was real. It’s the society the Apostle Paul faced when He brought the Gospel to the city of Athens around 50 AD!

It is important for us to take special note of our sermon text because it seems as if our American society is becoming more and more like ancient Athens every day. There are many people in our own country – yes, even in our own city – who don’t know anything about the true God. Therefore, with the apostle Paul as our guide, let us learn to witness **The truth about. . . 1) God 2) Man and 3) Salvation.**

Part One: The truth about . . . God.

Our sermon text finds the Apostle Paul witnessing the Gospel before some of Athens’ most important and influential men. How did he get there? Luke tells us that Paul, when he saw all the idols in Athens, was so troubled by the spiritual condition of that city, that he worked extra hard to share the Gospel - not only in the synagogues, but also in the market places with whomever would let him. Some philosophers heard Paul’s preaching and, considering it both “novel” and “strange,” invited him to explain his religion at a meeting of the Aeropaus.

We read: ²² *Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³ for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.*

The people of Athens were very "spiritual." The city was filled with altars and temples to many different gods. They were constantly searching for meaning, purpose and peace in life, but the fact that they even had altars to unknown gods, shows the futility of their idolatry: that, in spite of their many gods their spiritual longing was not fulfilled.

Our fellow countrymen are also searching for meaning, purpose and happiness. Sure, a lot of them claim that they are not religious, but they will still say they are "spiritual" – and I believe them. The problem is that they are searching for God and peace in the wrong places – like nature, money, science or the human spirit. And, even if they won't admit it, the truth is that none of these idols satisfy the true longing of the soul. Everyone knows, deep in his heart, that there is Something out there, but what it is, they can't see. It is, "the unknown God."

Paul says: *Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: ²⁴ God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵ Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.*

All human inventions of god are foolish when compared to the true God. People imagine God having a form or shape, taking up time and space, and being in some way limited, and influenced by what we do. These ideas go against the Bible's concept of the one, true God who is not limited by time and space or anything else. God is God. He made the universe and everything in it. He can do anything and everything he wants to do and is answerable to no one. He does not have a face or form as we might imagine him to have because *God is Spirit*¹. And we can't influence Him with our service any more than the actions and desires of an ant can influence us.

Who is God? Paul tells us first of all who he isn't: He is not some pagan idol, a statue in a temple, or an invisible force like in Star Wars, . He is not the spirit of humanity or the combined forces of nature. He is not money, fame or science.

The truth about God is far greater than the human mind can conceive, and yet He reveals himself to us in Scripture as He is: the God who made all and is above all, who is answerable to no one, and in no way has to do anything for us, and yet who, in undeserved love, has chosen to care for us – not because of who we are, what we can offer, or what we deserve - rather, because of who He is. In his absolute freedom of will, God decided to pity man and save him from his rebellion and sin!

And this leads us to consider the truth about man.

Part Two: The truth about . . . Man.

St. Paul says: *He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷ so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'*

We are not by-products of evolution. No, every person – regardless of race or gender – is a son or daughter of Adam. From one person every nation of humanity has come. And because we all come from that one man, we all have inherited his sin and deserve eternal damnation because of it.

But God does not want anyone lost. He loves us, and this is why He didn't just "haphazardly" scatter people over this earth – letting his creation evolve in chaos. No, God sent each person into the time and place He determined with a distinct purpose: that they search for and find him.

God wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And even though faith comes only through the Gospel of Christ, God has at all times and in all places wanted all people to be saved. He is not far from anyone, for even heathen poets could sense (but not see) the truth that we all are his offspring, his creation. Without him, we could not continue to live or even begin to exist.

Ever since the fall into sin, man's purpose has been to search for the true God. And even though we are like men groping around in total darkness, He is not far from any of us. The LORD allows himself to be found in Scripture - the Scripture we Christians have been commanded to share with the world.

Now someone might say: "But what about the people who live on an isolated island and never had the chance to hear the Gospel before they died? How can you say God wanted them saved if He never gave them the chance to hear the Gospel?" God is not far from anyone – not even the people on remote islands. No matter where a person is on this earth, God's desire for them is the same – to grope after and find him. The problem of their unbelief is not God's fault for when and where he decided they should live, but their own, as the Scriptures says: ²⁰ *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,* ²¹ *because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*ⁱⁱ

Each person has been created with a longing in his heart to search for the true God in order to find peace, forgiveness and mercy in Him. The problem is that many try to quench or squelch that longing through pleasure, creating false gods, or denying him all together. Thus, they refuse to be found by God who so mercifully desires that they know the truth and be saved. And what is the truth that God wants all people to know?

Part Three: The truth about . . . salvation.

That, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

Since God is far more powerful and involved than anything we can imagine, we should not think that God is like anything we imagine or that we can appease or influence him in any way that we devise.

³⁰ *Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked - that is, God did not destroy all the heathen nations for their unbelief like He did in the flood. He let them continue to exist – even though they turned to worship false gods that they knew were not the "true" God who created all and is far above all. And why did he allow them to continue on this earth? So that they might hear the truth, repent of their sin and idolatry and be saved, as St. Paul says: but now [God] commands all men everywhere to repent,* ³¹ *because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."*

A day of judgment will come on this earth – a day when all people will clearly see that God was near them and truly desired their salvation. Sadly most people refuse to be found, forgiven, and saved. But those who trust in the God-man Jesus, who lived the perfect life we all failed to live, died for our sin, and rose again to show that every sin has been forgiven, will enjoy eternal life with God in the perfect paradise He will have prepared for them.

The point is this: Repent and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. All religions are not the same, as some people ignorantly claim. Christianity is very different. The religions man invents all teach that if you are good, you appease god and save yourself. But the Bible teaches that man is too sinful and God too righteous and holy for that to happen. Instead, the Bible teaches that – even though man can do nothing to earn or incur His favor: *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the truth Paul attempted to proclaim in Athens, and this is the truth God wants us to zealously confess in our own country and culture. Sadly, most of the people gathered to hear Paul mocked him for his confession of Christ. But there were a few who listened and believed, and their faith made Paul's confession all worth it.

What Paul experienced, we can expect: most people will either laugh at us or politely put us off when we confess Christ. But there will also be a small number that listen, repent and be saved. They are the reason we confess the truth about God, man, and our salvation. May their salvation move you to boldly find and use the opportunities the LORD gives you to share the Gospel – remembering the LORD's promise: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."*^{iv} Amen.

ⁱ John 4:24 NKJV

ⁱⁱ Rom 1:18-23 NKJV

ⁱⁱⁱ John 3:16 NKJV

^{iv} John 5:24 NKJV